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Cover by Rob Sauber



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Good-bye Mayor Barkin

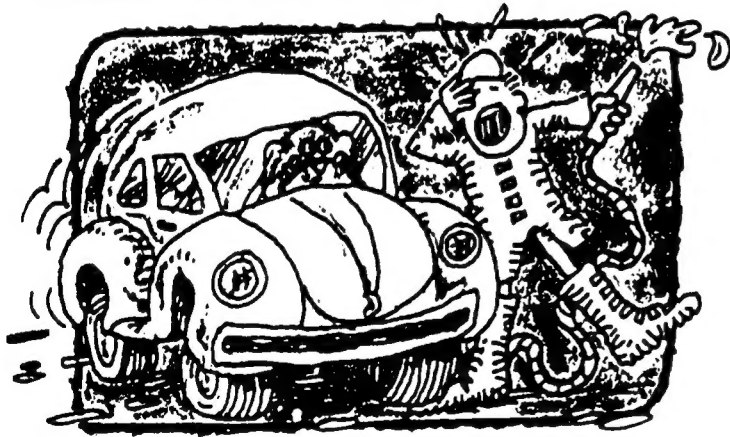
by Jack Ritchie

It happens once a year in our town, and it's supposed to give the students at Stevenson High a feeling for democracy and the democratic process, and to let us identify with the system.

This means that for one day we take over the town government which consists of Mayor Barkin and four aldermen.

Anyway, when the Selecting Committee at Stevenson got through selecting, there were six of us students in Mayor Barkin's office for the briefing.

They stuck me with the job of acting mayor, and the four aldermen were Dollars McKenzie, whose father runs



the bank; Mary Lou Sullivan, who is Stevenson's number one cheerleader; Henry Hamilton, the school brain; and Oswald Barkin, who is usually eating something and is also the son of Mayor Barkin. Emily Hibbler got the job of recording secretary.

"What are we supposed to do?" I asked Mayor Barkin.

He chuckled and began passing out sheets of paper. "You pass all kinds of resolutions and things like that. Here's a resolution congratulating the city clerk on her birthday and wishing her many more. And here's another urging all property owners and renters to display the flag on Flag Day."

He paused over one of the sheets. "Here's a resolution wishing Eddie Frems a speedy recovery. He's one of our volunteer firemen, and his toe was run over by a Volkswagen at that grass fire last week. And we might as well pass another resolution asking the citizens to kindly stay out of the way of the authorized firemen, or somebody might get hurt."

Mayor Barkin is a round man with a pink face, and he's also in the clothing store business on Main Street. He opened the store when he moved here from Stapleton two years ago. He's a pretty civic-minded man, and Dad says it usually takes an outsider to show the rest of us the way. He was elected mayor because he campaigned hard. Besides, there was nobody running against him.

The town council meets on the second Tuesday of the month, and it doesn't draw much of a crowd, if anybody. There's usually just the mayor. There are supposed to be four aldermen attending, but likely as not, a couple of

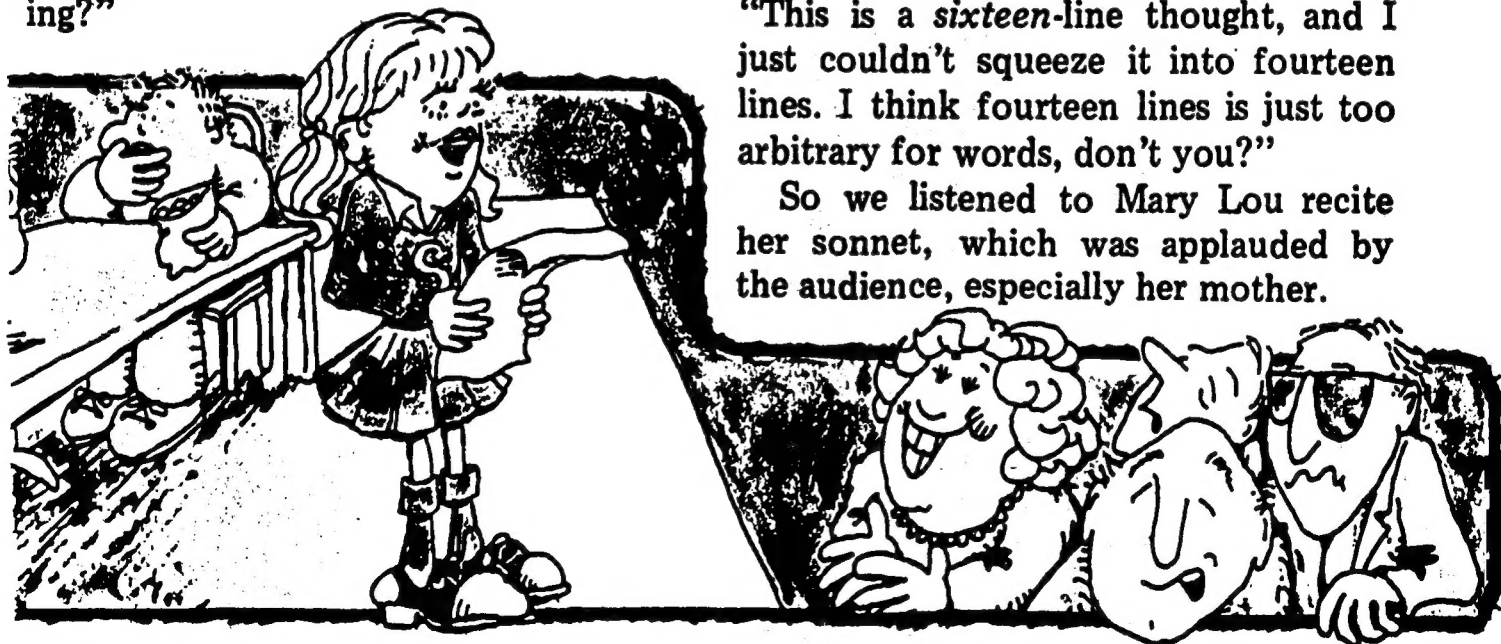
them will have colds or prior commitments. The mayor is probably the only person who knows what's going on.

Most of the time the council meetings are held in the mayor's office, because there's plenty of room for anybody interested, but this time we all filed downstairs to the city hall auditorium which was filled with students, teachers, parents, and whatever.

Mayor Barkin made a short speech telling everybody what was going to happen, and then he turned to us. "I now hand the reins of our fair town over to you young ladies and gentlemen, our hope for the future. You now have the full powers of office until midnight tonight."

There was applause. The mayor and the councilmen left their chairs and took places in the audience. They beamed. Everybody beamed.

I rapped the gavel. "The meeting will now come to order. Will the secretary read the minutes of the previous meeting?"



Emily Hibbler leafed through a big black book. "Which previous meeting? The one the mayor and the council had two weeks ago, or the one we kids had last year?"

"The one we had last year."

"It doesn't seem to be here. Linda Tyson was secretary last year. Maybe she took the page home as a souvenir."

"Let us skip the minutes," I said. "Is there any old business?"

People looked at one another and nobody could think of any.

I rapped the gavel again. "Is there any new business?"

Mary Lou Sullivan put aside her knitting. "Mr. Mayor-person, I would like to have entered into the record a poem which I have composed to commemorate our happy carefree days in good old Stevenson High."

Henry Hamilton scowled. "I don't remember any happy carefree days. Mostly, it was toil and trouble. Blood, sweat, and tears."

"How long is this poem?" I asked.

"Only sixteen lines. It's a sonnet."

Henry frowned. "A sonnet is supposed to have fourteen lines."

She smiled at him with great pity. "This is a *sixteen-line* thought, and I just couldn't squeeze it into fourteen lines. I think fourteen lines is just too arbitrary for words, don't you?"

So we listened to Mary Lou recite her sonnet, which was applauded by the audience, especially her mother.

Henry Hamilton hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his sleeveless sweater. "I have not come here to indulge in meaningless rhetoric or to mouth empty phrases. I move that we

commend Mr. Swenson, our school janitor, for the admirable job he has done for lo, these many years and to double his salary."

Dollars McKenzie got up. "Where is the money coming from?" he demanded.

Mayor Barkin smiled tolerantly. "The council does not have the authority to raise the school janitor's salary. That is in the province of the school board."

Mary Lou Sullivan got the chair's attention. "I move that we pass a resolution congratulating the Legion Ladies Auxiliary for the swell job they did in planting those four poplar trees on Main Street."

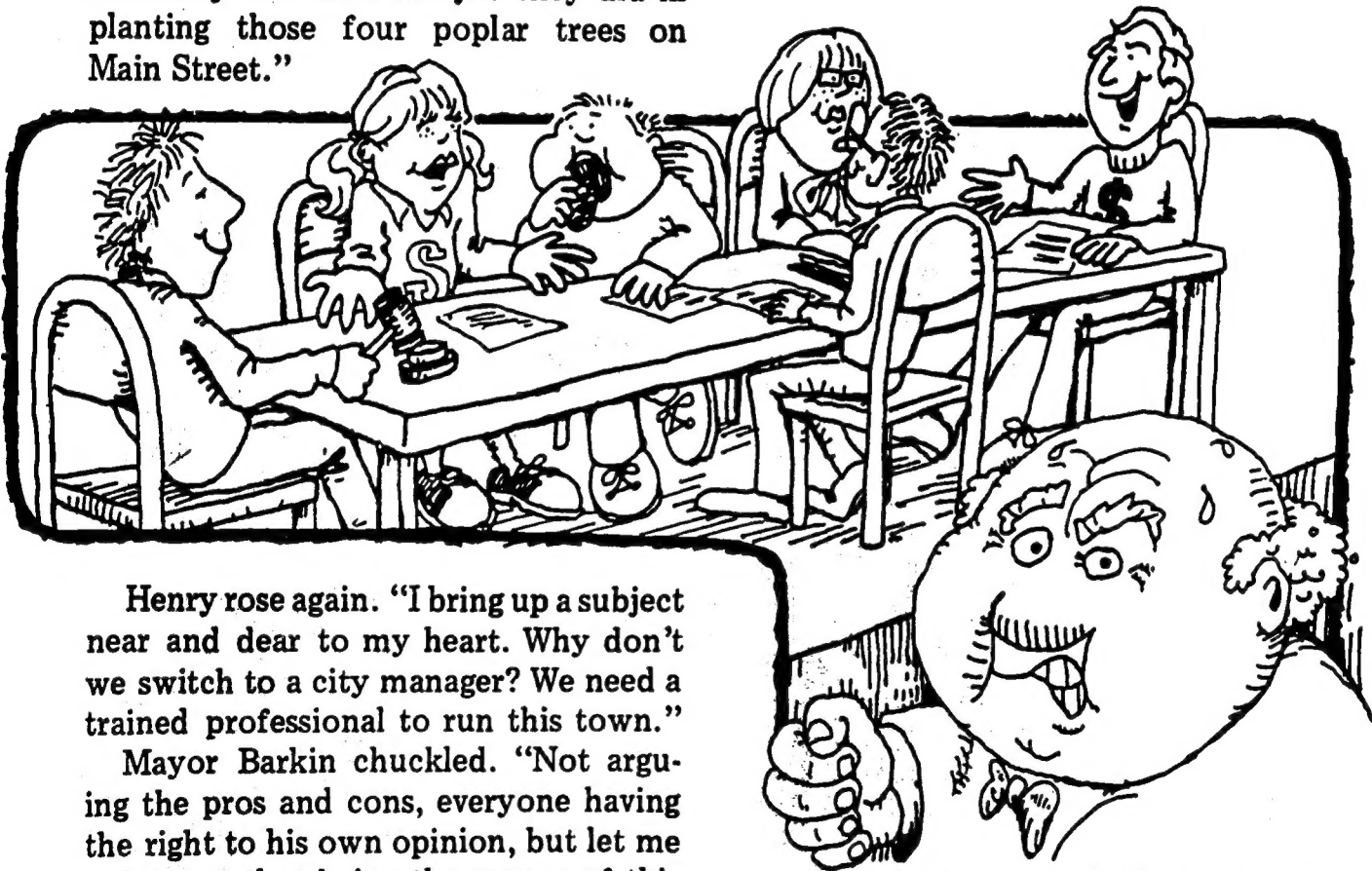
mayor's raise to the Finance Committee for further study and consideration."

Mary Lou Sullivan seemed puzzled. "What does that mean?"

Dollars McKenzie smiled grimly. "It means that this particular piece of legislation will pass over our dead bodies."

Oswald Barkin put down his candy-nut roll. "How come we never get steaks or chops in the school cafeteria? Everything is ground, casserole, or wieners."

Mrs. O'Brien, who is head of the cafeteria at Stevenson, got up. "On our



Henry rose again. "I bring up a subject near and dear to my heart. Why don't we switch to a city manager? We need a trained professional to run this town."

Mayor Barkin chuckled. "Not arguing the pros and cons, everyone having the right to his own opinion, but let me point out that being the mayor of this fair community is only a part-time job. You couldn't get any city manager to work for the peanuts I get." He smiled broader. "While you're at it, why don't you vote *me* a raise?"

Dollars McKenzie raised a hand. "I move that we refer the matter of the

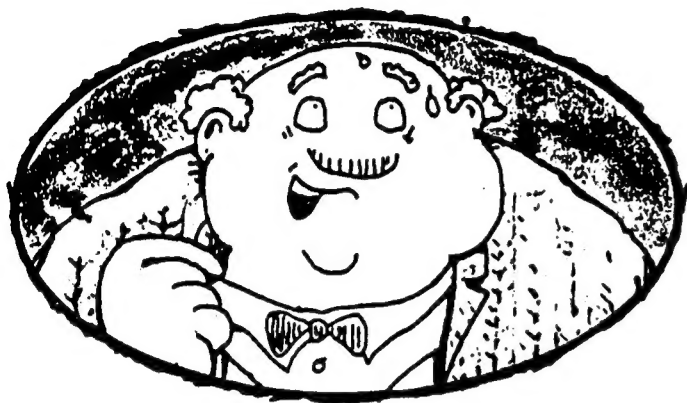
operating budget, you're lucky to get chili con carne." Then she quickly reassured the parents around her. "However, the meals are fully balanced, scientifically planned, and nutritious. Truly a bargain at the price."

Oswald Barkin pushed aside his bag of potato chips and rose. He read from

a sheet of paper. "RESOLUTION 94. RESOLVED, that the proposal of Witherspoon's Lawn Mower Service, Stapleton, in the amount of \$61.91, to repair the town's power mower be accepted."

Mayor Barkin got up. "That was taken care of at our last meeting, Oswald. You've got the wrong paper."

Emily Hibbler looked up. "I've been



paging through these old minutes. So far, the town power mower has been repaired six times in six months. It all comes to more than \$410."

Mayor Barkin shrugged. "Once in a while you get a mower that gives you trouble."

Emily chewed on her pencil. "According to the minutes, the mower was bought from Witherspoon's Lawn Mower Service, new, seven months ago. Didn't the town get a guarantee?"

Mayor Barkin cleared his throat. "I'm glad you brought that to my attention. I'll look into it."

Mary Lou Sullivan looked up from her knitting. "Witherspoon? Now I remember where I heard that name before. My mother went to one of those kitchenware parties and brought home six ceramic egg cups. Anyway, she met your wife, Mayor Barkin, and they got to talking. Don't you have a daughter in Stapleton married to somebody named Witherspoon?"

Mayor Barkin got a little red in the face.

Oswald Barkin brushed potato chips from his shirt. "RESOLUTION NO. 95. RESOLVED, that the proposal of the Habersham Construction Company, Stapleton, in the amount of \$6,710, be and is accepted for repair and renovation of the municipal swimming pool according to the bid specifications."

Mayor Barkin seemed to be losing his temper. "That was taken care of at our last regular meeting, Oswald. I told you you had the wrong paper. Now sit down and shut up."

Dollars McKenzie rose. "Where will the money come from? Besides, how do we know the swimming pool really needs repairs? Especially \$6,710 worth. The last time I swam in it, I didn't notice any leaks. I move that we rescind RESOLUTION NO. 95, and table the entire matter for further study and consideration."

Mayor Barkin jumped to his feet. "You can't undo what has been done."

"Why not?" Dollars McKenzie demanded. "You gave us full powers to do any town business until midnight."

Mary Lou Sullivan looked up. "They had little roses hand-painted on the sides. The egg cups, I mean. Not the swimming pool. And Mother picked up a recipe for butterscotch-banana pie that's out of this world. Mr. Mayor, isn't your wife's maiden name Habersham?"

I'd been sitting there and thinking about our aldermen. There was Dr. Weems of the First Ward, but he probably missed most of the council meetings because of some dire medical emergency or something. Mr. Newman of the Second Ward manages George's

Supermarket and probably can't make too many of the meetings because he puts in a long day.

And I thought about Alderman Horatio Smith of the Third Ward, who also works in Mayor Barkin's clothing store. Come to think of it, he came to town just about the same time Mayor Barkin did. And Alderman Parker, who lives in a room at the hotel and plays pool a lot. He didn't have anybody running against him in the last election either. Somehow I got the sudden feeling that neither Smith nor Parker ever missed a council meeting.

I turned to Emily Hibbler. "Will the secretary please read the minutes of a previous meeting?"

"Which one?" she asked.

"I don't think it matters. Just dig in."

She turned pages of the notebook. "RESOLUTION NO. 85. RESOLVED, that the proposal of the Smith Furniture Store, Stapleton, in the amount of \$4,783, to refurnish the mayor's office be accepted."

Everybody looked at Alderman Horatio Smith, who sat in the first row. His eyes shifted from here to there. "Smith is a very common name. I could

have relatives anywhere, for all I know. I don't keep track of all of them."

Mayor Barkin wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "We have done nothing illegal. None of us. And I defy anyone to prove it."

I asked Emily to read some more minutes, but Mayor Barkin had to leave, saying he was feeling a little under the weather. Aldermen Smith and Parker didn't look too good, either, when they left.

Like Mayor Barkin said, nobody could prove that he'd done anything illegal, or at least it would have taken a lot of time and money to do it.

Anyway, the question is moot, like they say in law, because the Barkins suddenly moved up north to Avon, where I hear he's running for mayor.

We had a special election here with six people running for the mayor's unexpired term. About that many ran for alderman in both the Third and Fourth wards, since both Smith and Parker had left town along with the former mayor.

The council meetings are real well attended now. I guess people like to watch democracy in action.

More carefully. ○

